Deep culture in action: resignification, synecdoche, and metanarrative in the moral panic of the Salem Witch Trials

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Abstract Sociological research on moral panics, long understood as "struggles for cultural power," has focused on the social groups and media conditions that enable moral panics to emerge, and on the consequences of moral panics for the social control systems of societies. In this article I turn instead to modeling the specific cultural process of *how* the conditions for a moral panic are turned into an actual moral panic, moving the understanding of moral panic away from its Durkheimian origins and towards a process-relational cultural sociology. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of myth and Kenneth Burke's dramatism, the paper posits the cultural process of resignification via synecdoche and metanarrative as the driver of the disproportion, concern, hostility, consensus, and volatility of moral panics. This process can be carefully traced in the case of the Salem Witch Trials; a retrospective reading reveals the same process at work in the "Mods and Rockers" panic analyzed by Stanley Cohen. Beyond moral panics, theorizing resignification as a non-exclusive counterpoint to framing and ideational embeddedness enriches the theoretical repertoire of cultural sociology. "Deep culture" and mythological signification can, using the schema proposed here, be understood as practical accomplishments—rhetorical responses to particular situations that, when performed successfully, legitimate violence and other forms of domination.

Keywords Theory of myth · Sociology of culture · Kenneth Burke · Roland Barthes · Culture and power · Semiotics

The *moral panic*, an enduring sociological concept that is now 40 years old, has been subject to a great deal of research, theory, and debate. This has resulted in an advance of sociological knowledge along two dimensions: (1) explanatory theories of why moral panics happen, which focus on the social conditions conducive to the occurrence of a moral panic (e.g., Hall et al. 1978; Jenkins 1992; Thompson 1998; Goode and Ben-

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Yehuda 2009); and (2) an understanding of how moral panics are consequential for society at large as well as for their immediate victims, because such panics are part of a larger process of social control and moral regulation, governance, and policing, especially in modern liberal democracies (e.g., Hall et al. 1978; Critcher 2009; Young 2009; Hier 2011; Hunt 2011). [1] In this article, I turn instead to a third dimension of the phenomenon, by creating a model for understanding the *cultural process* by which the conditions for a moral panic are turned into an actual moral panic. By looking inside moral panics to see how they work in this way—that is, by taking a process-relational approach (Olick 2007) to moral panics, so as to comprehend better how they are "struggles over cultural power"—we can enhance the theoretical repertoire of the sociology of culture.

I argue that moral panics are built up out of resignification, a specific kind of public, communicative work that achieves its ends (when it succeeds) via synecdoche and metanarrative. Those who have an interest in a moral panic happening must perform resignification successfully, otherwise their interest will remain unfulfilled. I develop this theoretical argument via a qualitative case study, wherein I engage in process tracing (Goldstone 2003; Mahoney 2012): I trace the cultural work of resignification during the Salem Witch Trials. Having identified and theorized what is taking place in that case, I then argue for the more general utility for sociology of the schema I propose, first by briefly outlining a retrospective application of the theory to the paradigm-setting case study for moral panics, Stanley Cohen's (2002 [1972]) account of the "Mods and Rockers" moral panic in 1960s Britain, and second by discussing the implications of resignification for the sociology of culture more generally.

Moral panic: concept, theory, and process

Since its introduction in the work of Stanley Cohen, the concept of moral panic has been extensively refined, but it has maintained a relatively consistent definition. "During a moral panic," Goode and Ben-Yehuda explain,

> a substantial number of the members of a given society harbor and express the feeling that evildoers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behavior, and therefore 'something should be done' about them and their behavior. A major focus of that 'something' typically entails strengthening the social control apparatus of the society … the threat of harm refers to a certain condition or behavior (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, p. 35).

This definition can be supplemented via Cohen's insistence that moral panics focus on "folk devils": the evil in society is attributed to a group or category of people who become "the personification of evil" (Goode and Ben-Yahuda 2009, p. 27) and are easily recognizable as "unambiguously unfavorable symbols" (Cohen 2002 [1972]; Goode and Ben-Yahuda 2009, p. 27). Given this preliminary definition, Goode and Ben-Yehuda identify five elements of a moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus,

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[1] A third strand of literature that is skeptical about the very utility of the concept has also emerged (Waddington 1986; Cornwell and Linders 2002).

disproportion, and volatility.[2] Each of these elements—and especially disproportion—have been debated and discussed at length in the literature, but for the purposes of this article I take them as accurately describing the elements of a moral panic.[3]

Theorizing moral panics: groups in society and the media

Why moral panics? Sociological research has developed two modi operandi for answering this question, one that focuses on the groups of people who drive moral panics forward, and one that notes the tremendous importance of the mass media for many (albeit not all) moral panics.

As is evident from any review of the literature, there are three ideal-typical explanations of the social origins of moral panics: elite-engineered, grassroots, and interest-group. An elite-engineered panic is characterized by (1) action by elites to fan the flames of panic, and (2) benefits that accrue to elites as a result of the panic. A frequent emphasis in sociological explanations of this sort of moral panic is the way that, if a moral panic happens during "troubled times," the elites' role will be to direct the populace towards the "folk devils" as a replacement for, or a distraction from, the deeper social crisis—one that might, if attended to by a large proportion of the population, put the elites' interests at risk. A grassroots panic is one in which the panic articulates and amplifies collective emotions that, in latent form, are widespread in the population. Although there may indeed be disproportionality as these emotions become public and extreme, the driving force in this sort of panic is the existing anxieties, fear, and dread that are widely held throughout the population (and may not have been initially directed at the emergent threat). Finally, an "interest-group" driven panic is one in which a group of actors who occupy the "middle rungs of power" (Goode and Ben-Yahuda 2009, p. 67) drives the panic, and uses it to bid for *more* power as a result. Obviously, actually-occurring moral panics approximate more or less well one of these three types and can combine or merge elements of more than one.

The concept of the "mass media" is contained in Cohen's original definition of moral panics and Goode and Ben-Yahuda devote the first substantive chapter of their book to the way the "media ignite and embody the moral panic." Garland (2008, p. 14)

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[2] See Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, p. 41, from which the following summary is drawn. Concern refers to the way the level of concern and fear vis-à-vis a threat is raised beyond its usual level and becomes widespread. Hostility refers to the anger and hatred directed at the "folk devils." Consensus refers to the way in which view of the threat as a threat is "substantial or widespread." Disproportion—probably the most controversial term in the literature due to its normative loading in some uses—refers to the exaggeration of the danger "actually" posed by the threat. Volatility refers to the way in which moral panics "erupt fairly suddenly … and, nearly as suddenly, subside."

[3] Alongside this definition and these elements, two longstanding associations accompany the concept of moral panic. The first is the association of moral panics with "troubled times." Often, analyses of moral panics implicitly or explicitly suggest that some of the anxiety that drives them is a result of major shifts within a society or the threat of such shifts; these anxieties are then analyzed as having been "channeled" into hostile emotions aimed at the "folk devil" that is the focus of the moral panic. The second is that moral panics are almost axiomatically viewed in the literature as a "symbolic struggle," or "a battle between cultural representations," and thus are theorized as fundamentally about cultural power. Where such power emanates from, and for whom it is exercised, are some of the central questions addressed by extant theories of moral panics. In this article, the "cultural" aspect of moral panics is taken for granted; the work to be done is to theorize better how this struggle for cultural power works in a moral panic and what those inner workings might tell us about the sociology of culture more generally.

opens his discussion of the concept of the moral panic with a report from *The New York Times,* and lists "the existence of a sensationalist mass media" as the first facilitating causal condition for moral panics. Both Garland and Goode and Ben-Yehuda admit that moral panics took place before the existence of the mass media (Garland 2008, p. 14: "perhaps an effective channel of communication is all that is needed"), but, for the modern era, both regard the presence and effectiveness of the media in telling the story of the supposed threat to society as a causally necessary factor for the generation of a moral panic, whatever its roots or sources.

Explanatory accounts of the mass media's role in moral panics imitate the theoretical logic that is applied to its social origins. These accounts provide relatively static accounts of why the media might be inclined to aid in the development of moral panics, depending on its inner constitution and the type of panic that is under examination. For example, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009, pp. 88–108) suggest five theories of the media: the market model, the mass-manipulation or "hypodermic needle" model, the professional subculture model, the interest-group model, and the multi-mediated model. This is, in essence, a typology of the media as a group with certain interests and norms and certain relationship with other groups in society that might be involved in a moral panic. These are theories of what the media are: what their interests, external constraints, and internal norms are; whether they are fragmented or unified; and so on.

But how does a moral panic work?

Research has shown that certain groups can drive moral panics and that communication and culture, and thus a "struggle for cultural power," are embodied in moral panics. However, when we get down to the nitty-gritty of how moral panics work, things are less clear. Lots of evocative verbiage accompanies an understanding of the craven media and their inclination to create disproportionality: the media "sensationalize," "exaggerate," "fan the flames" and "look for the human interest angle" of a given threat; they "demonize" outsiders and deviants, and so on. So, while sociological research has developed a theoretical apparatus good at identifying who benefits from a moral panic and good at pointing to the conditions conducive of a moral panic, it has a less clear account of the inner workings of panics. How, theoretically speaking, is a "situation" or "occurrence" *transformed* into a panic? We know that this process may benefit this or that group, and we know that it relies upon communication and culture, but what are its inner workings? When it comes to the cultural process, in other words, vague metaphors and pejorative references to the sensationalist mass media often substitute for theories of culture and action. This works well enough for the explanations of specific moral panics, but not for how we understand the workings of culture in a larger theoretical sense.

In some broad sense, this gap in the literature reveals the Durkheimian and social psychological origins of the concept. Moral panics are understood to be a kind of cresting wave of social solidarity achieved via the exclusion of deviants, and the term panic connotatively evokes a physically co-present crowd, even if the concept itself is supposed to refer to a broader process. Given the way in which the concept has endured, however, it is perhaps time to remove it from the Le Bon-Durkheim tradition

of group psychology and plant it firmly, instead, in the intellectual context of process-relational cultural sociology (Olick 2007).[4] To do this, we can begin by building on an insightful, but truncated, account of signification in one of the earliest studies of moral panics.

Policing the crisis and the spiral of signification

In *Policing the Crisis,* Hall et al. identified a "spiral of signification" that developed in the course of a moral panic, concluding that the media—while formally autonomous from the British state—tended to reinforce the state's interpretation of a "crisis" in British society. To make their argument, they developed three concepts: linkage, convergence, and threshold. Semiotic linkages draw together different imagery, making separate problems *converge* in the perception of the public (e.g., student protest and hooliganism). Then, the panic goes through three "thresholds," each of which requires increasingly violent responses from the state. So, by associating student protest with hooliganism, the media could help justify the violent repression of students by the state. Hall et al. also identified as fundamental the process whereby a crime was labeled, and by being so labeled, understood in terms of a whole series of meanings.

However, the detailed analysis by Hall et al. of the coverage of "mugging" in the British press does not lead to a theory of cultural process in moral panics. Instead, their central explanatory factors are macro-structural, relatively stable, if of course ultimately subject to some sort of contestation: "news values" (1978, pp. 53–54) or "professional media ideologies and practices," (1978, p. 57), the presumption of, and production of the image of, "consensus" in the media (1978, p. 66), and so on.[5] Thus the extensive analysis of the mugging panic, while extremely suggestive, does not develop a theoretical model of signification-in-action during moral panics. This is traceable, quite simply, to a difference in the focus of the analysis: Hall et al. reference moral panics and spirals of signification so as to develop a better theory of the state and ideology in late twentieth-century capitalist societies; they are less concerned with modeling the moral panic itself. In contrast, I address the following: what makes the spiral of signification in a moral panic "go"? How are the symbolic linkages that designate a folk devil as a source of immediate threat established? The theorization of moral panics as a cultural process of *resignification* can provide some answers to these questions.

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[4] Jeffrey Olick's essay, "Figurations of Memory: A Process-Relational Methodology, Illustrated on the German Case," (2007) provides a reconceptualization of collective memory that also moves that concept away from its initial Durkheimian, "substantialist" conceptualization (see especially pp. 89-92 for the critique of Halbwachs/Durkheim). He does this via four concepts: field, medium, genre, and profile. These, he argues, allow the analysis of "figurations of memory" in a way that avoids reification, assumptions of unity, etc. In somewhat parallel fashion, I propose to use resignification, synecdoche, and metanarrative to reconceptualize the moral panic as process here.

[5] Thus it should not surprise us that Hall et al. find some common ground with Kai Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* (1966). While Erikson articulates a Durkheimian perspective—in which Puritan society secures its solidarity via the exclusion of deviants—Hall et al. present the Marxist mirror image of this view, in which consensus is *produced ideologically* by targeting deviance. For Hall et al., the differentiated sectors of the market oriented media, the police force, and the judiciary arm of the state intersect to produce an effective image of consensus, wherein disagreement in the newspapers serves to communicate more effectively the overall consensus vis-à-vis the "mugging" threat in London.

Resignification as a cultural process

In the concluding essay to his 1972 book *Mythologies*, the literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes introduced a theory of myth. He proposed that "myth" worked at a *secondary level of signification*. This secondary level was, Barthes hypothesized, an important location of cultural power. Technically, what Barthes proposed in his theory of myth was a recursive iteration of the dyadic theory of the sign. If a sign consists of a signifier (the word, image, or sound that makes itself known materially) and a signified (the ideas and associations called forth in people's minds, which the signifier represents), then in iterative signification a certain sign, call it "sign1"(=signifier1+signified1), became a signifier in another "second level" or deeper sign, so that sign2=signifier2+signified2=sign1+signified2. Pictorially, Barthes diagrammed this as in Fig. 1.

Barthes suggested that the second level of signification, often primarily composed of subtle connotations rather than explicit denotations, was the level of "myth" and thus where ideology was most powerful. As an example, he analyzed a cover of *Paris Match* that depicted a black boy dressed in a military beret saluting a flag as, connotatively, communicating the legitimacy of French colonialism.

In Barthes's semiotics, the meanings of these various levels of signification were analyzed primarily via the synchronic system of various "languages." In some broad sense, this accorded with the structuralist approach to language and culture (alternately identifiable as "Saussurean objectivism") so vividly and effectively criticized by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, pp. 1–71, esp. 22–30), and, more recently, by the revival of Peirce in American sociology (Swedberg 2012). Yet, it is possible to retain, even within post-Saussurean semiotics, an appreciation of the insight offered by the analysis of myth as "deep signification" that is connotative, ideologically powerful, and "layered" on top of a first level of meaning. To develop this, I propose to appropriate some literary terms of analysis and to follow Barthes's core schema of two layers of signification but to interpret both the theoretical terms proposed and the layering of signification as Kenneth Burke (1973a) interpreted literature itself, as "equipment for living." *Resignification*, as a practical accomplishment, can be analyzed as made up of two subprocesses, *synecdoche* and *metanarrative*. These subprocesses allow us to see resignification as the active, practical construction of a second, "mythological" level of signification via situated speech acts.

Synecdoche is Burke's master term for the many ways something can be made to stand in for something else. As Burke explains, synecdoche can include "part for whole, whole for the part, contained for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made … cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc. All such conversions imply an integral relationship, a relationship of convertability, between the two terms" (1969, pp. 507–508). Elsewhere, Burke (1973b, pp. 25–33) argued strongly for the centrality of the "synecdochic function,"
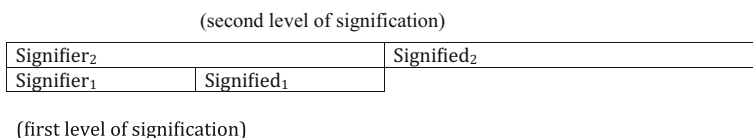
(second level of signification)

Signifier₂		Signified₂
Signifier₁	Signified₁	

(first level of signification)

Fig. 1 Roland Barthes's theory of signification and myth

noting that it applies to three different regimes of representation (sensory, artistic, and political). He also connected it to the social process of scapegoating (which is also a dynamic sometimes attributed to moral panics), explaining that the scapegoat serves "as the symbolic vessel of certain burdens, which are ritualistically delegated to it." (1973b, p. 27) Synecdoche can, furthermore, encompass or blur into the other well-known terms of metaphor and metonymy; for the purposes of this analysis I understand metaphor and metonymy as subtypes of the master term, synecdoche.

"Standing in for,"—and in particular, when a meaningful sign becomes a signifier for a second, more connotative and evocative meaning—is one way the deeper, mythological level of signification can be reached. Consider again the photograph analyzed by Barthes. At the first level of signification, the *Paris Match* cover is a representation of a black boy in soldiers garb—the photograph stands in for the actual boy, but this "standing in for" is relatively denotative or "realist." However, at the second level of signification, the synecdochic function of the photograph is much greater and more powerful—the picture-boy sign itself becomes a signifier, standing in for something less tangible but massively important, namely the legitimacy of French colonialism. This can be understood, pragmatically, as an imperative directed at white French people, along these lines: "black Africans think the empire is legitimate and good, and you should too!" Thus the photograph analyzed by Barthes could be said, in Burke's terms, to be synecdochic for the legitimacy of the French Empire.

The second element of resignificaton—*metanarrative*—connects the experience of temporality by actors to a specific way of cognizing that temporality. I take it as uncontroversial that one way in which actors make sense of experience, and in particular, its temporal dimension, is to narrate it—to tell stories with a beginning, middle, and end, antagonists and protagonists, etc. Furthermore, these stories are often appropriated from one setting and applied to a new one and, in each setting, serve not only to render the setting meaningful, but also to call forth certain actions—stories have both a declarative and imperative function (Polletta 2006; Tilly 2002; Jasper 1999). Examining stories in this way has become particularly useful to the analysis of culture in social movements. Stories are part of how the world is signified and framed.

In *re*signification, however, something more specific happens: different concrete occurrences are narrated, and then many specific stories are grouped under and connected to a *meta*narrative. The debate on metanarratives and master narratives in social theory is of course extensive.[6] But here I use the term to indicate the calling forth, in speech and writing, of an overarching story or plot that takes as its protagonist transgenerationally defined collectivities, organizes the destinies of such collectivities into an extended timeline, provides an understanding of the ultimate purpose of human action, and arranges a vision of future and past that goes beyond the empirically

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[6] Via the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Frederic Jameson, James Clifford, and Hayden White, the implication of social theory and the philosophy of history itself with various metanarratives became an arena of fierce debate, which circled around the idea of postmodernity as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv) and, even more intensely on the difference between "master" and "local" narratives and the implications of the distinction for imagining a postcolonial anthropology. For an extended discussion, see Klein 1995. I do not take a position on this debate *except* to reserve the possibility that metanarrative is still rhetorically active in "late modern" or "postmodern" societies, for example in the intertwining of personal stories with heroic narratives about "America" in US presidential elections (Alexander 2010, pp. 63–88).

verifiable. I propose not to judge metanarratives politically (at least not immediately, as part of the analysis), but rather to examine their use. For, metanarratives provide actors with a way of understanding the "underlying" significance of more specific stories, narrations of events and occurrences, and so on. Insofar as they can render such understandings, metanarratives are thus tools in a game of rhetorical power.

In the photograph analyzed by Barthes, there is also a metanarrative present, namely, the narrative of "civilization" or "civilizational progress," which was used repeatedly to justify European colonialism. Thus, at the second, mythological level of signification, the black boy soldier signifies not only "the empire's legitimacy," but also the grand story according to which France is a "modern" society bringing civilization to its African colonies, whose people are "stuck in the past." Indeed, one might note that the very use of a *child* soldier on the cover contributes to this metanarrative, via the connotation that the people of Africa are "children" who are somehow "younger" than the adult French persons reading *Paris Match*. The implication of the metanarrative is, then, that France will, via colonization, teach Africans to "grow up." The power of the civilizational metanarrative comes from the way it can link up many more specific stories (e.g., of a military campaign and its consequences, the development of a new set of "native policies," and so on). Some examples of metanarratives that have been analyzed in this way include the liberal-progressive metanarrative of democratic politics; the neoliberal metanarrative of the spread of markets; the communist narrative of work, revolution, and liberation; and the Christian/eschatological metanarrative of the second coming and salvation.

Note how these two aspects of resignification—synecdoche and metanarrative—interlock and reinforce one another. Insofar as "boy soldier" stands in for (synecdochic function) the "inexperienced youth" of African peoples, it reinforces the grand metanarrative of civilization. And to the extent that the narrative of the "civilizing" influence of France on Africa is present, it reinforces the way a black soldier's salute is a recognition of the legitimacy of French colonialism. However, my ultimate intent here is not to affirm or dispute Barthes analysis per se (though much of it remains, 40 years later, quite convincing), but rather to clarify the meaning of the theoretical schema whereby the interlocking performance of synecdoche and metanarrative make up the process of resignification. It is my argument that such a process is essential to what we understand as moral panics. Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, however, it is useful to differentiate this notion of resignification via synecdoche and metanarrative from two other important theoretical terms used in cultural analysis: framing and ideational embeddedness.

Framing

The concept of "framing processes" has had tremendous impact on sociological research on social movements in the last quarter of a century, leading to a productive intersection of the sociology of culture and the sociology of social movements (Polletta 2008; Swidler 1995). And though the Salem Witch Trials were *not* a social movement in the modern sense, there were framing processes at work at Salem, particularly during the early questioning of the accused by magistrates, wherein "what is going on here," and the nature of the crimes at issue was being established through a back-and-forth interactional struggle. Theoretically, drawing on Goffman (1974), frames are "schemata

of interpretation" that help define situations, people, objects in the world, etc. By "render[ing] events or occurrences meaningful" (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 614), frames both lend coherence to experience and suggest paths of action to take. Theorists of frames and framing see social movement actors as "signifying agents" who are "deeply embroiled" in the "politics of signification" (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 613; Hall 1982). This definition is quite broad and has been variously broken down into a wide variety of subtypes of frames (e.g., master frames—which has some overlap with metanarratives, organizational frames, and primary frames), as well as subtypes of framing processes (e.g., frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation, all subtypes of the process of "frame alignment" [Snow et al. 1986]). However, the broad trend in the literature is for analysis of framing processes to focus on frame *shifts*—strategic maneuvering within cultural landscapes—and thus on the potential value, for social movements attempting to achieve certain goals, in replacing one frame with another. Thus "framing processes" often involve an "either-or" structure wherein something that is viewed as just and inevitable becomes, under the new frame, unjust and changeable.

In contrast, resignification has an explicitly "both-and" structure, wherein the actions signified *both* stand for themselves (e.g., witches) and simultaneously for something else (e.g., a larger moral crisis of declension in Massachusetts), and this second "deeper" level of signification takes on a kind of mythological resonance. In other words, in resignification an object or set of actions becomes both what it is initially seen as, *and* what it signifies on a mythological level. And, while frames may amplify values or change specific beliefs, the concept of resignification points towards a cultural operation that activates "deep culture" in the form of myths, constructed as melodramatic metanarratives.[7] In resignification, myths do not *replace* a previous understanding of an issue or event, or "change the frame," but rather add layers of understanding, connotative meanings, and overall "weight." To return to the example from Barthes, a framing argument might claim that the *Paris Match* cover "reframes" the soldier as "French" rather than "African," or perhaps reframes French colonialism as "respected and adored" rather than "resented." However, such an analysis does not move towards what most interested Barthes, namely the way the second level of signification could be both more connotative and more powerful, all while leaving the first level of signification intact.

Ideational embeddedness

In their article on the two welfare revolutions, Margaret Somers and Fred Block identify ideational embeddedness at work when certain "ideas, public narratives and explanatory systems by which states, societies, and political cultures construct, transform, explain and normalize market processes" (2005, p. 264). They then argue that market fundamentalism achieved a certain "epistemic privilege" to construe what explains poverty in the two welfare revolutions of 1834 and 1996, thus "embedding" poverty in this new, ascendant ideational context. Thus ideational embeddedness emerges, alongside framing, as another way to understand cultural process.

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[7] For an analysis of the timely utility of melodrama in literature, see Brooks (1995).

However, the explanation that ideational embeddedness allows Block and Somers to make is an explanation that, akin to those of Karl Polanyi who inspires them, is really an explanation of the triumph of a theory-cum-worldview *over the medium term* for explaining an accepted phenomenon or fact. In other words, while Somers and Block focus on two welfare revolutions, their explanation identifies the medium term spread and diffusion of a "way of thinking" (e.g., what is now often called "neoliberalism"). Ideational embeddedness is, then, less useful for mapping the very specific, well-timed speech acts that lend connotative, mythological significance to a highly concrete set of actions taking place in public. Put another way, ideational embeddedness does not really describe a *performance.* It refers to a persuasive worldview that evolves and spreads over time to become particularly powerful, rather than capturing the urgency and volatility that characterizes moral panics.[8]

In summary, we could say the following to differentiate the three concepts. Framing tends to refer to cultural processes that are highly temporally specific but not necessarily deep (iconically, a social movement "changing the frame" via its media strategy), while ideational embeddedness refers to cultural processes that are deep but more medium-term and less essentially linked to timing and volatility (iconically, the triumph of market-centric thinking in certain democratic polities). In contrast, *resignification* refers to a process that is *deep and temporally specific.* To accomplish resignification is to carry the day with a melodramatic performance and thus to make melodrama and myth the essential equipment for living through the troubled time of the here and now.

The Salem Witch Trials as a moral panic: resignification in action

An important reference point for a classic work on deviance and society (Erikson 1966), the Salem Witch Trials hold a special place in American history and memory, secured in perpetuity by Arthur Miller's popular play *The Crucible.* The Trials also fit all the sociological elements, basic intuitions, and theoretical associations that have developed through and around the concept of a "moral panic"—excepting the presence of the mass media (see Table 1 for summary). A few comments on the "fit" of Salem and its utility for broader theoretical analysis will be useful.

First, the Salem Witch Trials were definitely a *disproportionate* response, and not only from a naturalistic perspective according to which witchcraft-qua-spellcasting does not exist (even if the social category of witch was real and important). For, even if we accept the reigning local interpretation of witches in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692—that they were real and harmful—one can still argue that the witch trials were a disproportionate response to the initial finding that a few teenage girls in Salem Village were "under an evil hand." Of all the witch trials in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, Salem was *by far* the largest, the deadliest, and the most emotionally charged

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[8] It is possible that the eventful, timely "resignification" that I identify in moral panics could play a causal role in the larger, longer process of ideational embeddedness, much as others have identified specific moral panics as part of larger, longer-term regimes of control. But they are, nonetheless, different concepts.

Table 1 The Salem Witch Trials as moral panic

Moral panics	Events in Essex County, summer of 1692
Times of uncertainty and change in the social order	Massachusetts Bay Colony charter was revoked in 1684; Dominion of New England dissolved after Glorious revolution, 1689; New charter was being negotiated in England in 1692.
Concern	Explosion of accusations of witchcraft; most witch trials involve only a few complaints, accusations in 1692 numbered in the hundreds.
Hostility	The witch was a manifestly profane symbol and witchcraft activated hostility towards "women out of place" as well as touching on the notion of Eve betraying Adam.
Consensus	Nearly unanimous opinion, among elites and laypeople, that witchcraft was real.
Disproportion	This unanimity about the *existence* of witchcraft, however, was coupled with a relatively temperate mode of dealing with witchcraft accusations in seventeenth-century New England. During the Salem episode, however, this way of dealing with witchcraft was abandoned for heightened concern, wild accusations, and a "something must be done" mentality.
Volatility	After erupting with accusations and hangings in 1692, Salem quickly became a source of shame for those involved and witchcraft was never again prosecuted with such violence and fervor in the North American English Colonies.
A sensationalist mass media	?

(Demos 2004; Weisman 1984).[9] This disproportion, furthermore, was eventually so extensive that it became disruptive of the very fabric of beliefs and practices that surrounded witchcraft accusations in Puritan Massachusetts. Carol Karlsen has shown in detail how seventeenth-century witchcraft accusations focused on "women out of place," and, in particular, on women who inherited property and challenged the (essentially patriarchal) workings of the Puritan inheritance system. The Salem episode followed the gendered pattern of men being more concerned with *maleficium* being committed against them, and women being more concerned with possession. However, as the accusations expanded wildly, and in particular towards men and women of wealth, status, and "good standing" within their congregations, the disproportionality began to present a problem to the gendered practices that supported more mundane witchcraft accusations. As Karlsen explains, "none of these later accusations [of extremely high status individuals] was taken seriously, but they could be ignored only by raising questions about the credibility of possessed persons and confessing witches, and about the validity of the 'spectral sign' so long allowed these two groups of women" (1998, p. 41). Hence Karlsen implicitly recognizes the disproportionality of Salem qua *moral panic* by noting that "ostensibly more pliant, Salem's confessing witches and, particularly, possessed females, were ultimately more subversive—of witchcraft beliefs in general and of witchcraft prosecutions" (1998, p. 41). Salem, in

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[9] By point of comparison, in September of 1692, another witch trial began in Stamford, Connecticut. It did not end in the same way at all, which is why no one outside historians of Colonial America has heard of it. The actors involved (who were aware of what had happened in Essex County Massachusetts that summer) "were for the most part remarkably cautious" in handling the accusations. "The officials responsible … refused to make hasty judgments about the accused and insisted on weighing carefully the evidence against them" (Godbeer 2005, pp. 7–8).

other words, was not a normal witch trial, and precisely insofar as it became a moral panic it also made later witch trials more difficult to justify.

Second, what is missing from Salem, of course, is the modern mass media. Scholars have noted that the media are not necessary for a moral panic to occur; in this analysis, we are allowed a more focused examination of resignificaton as a practical accomplishment. I use evidence that was, in fact, generated by the roughly equivalent institution to the mass media in Puritan society: the widely attended, and reprinted for consumption by those who could not attend, sermons of Congregationalist ministers (for the importance of sermons in seventeenth-century New England culture, see Toulouse 1987; Gustafson 2000). By examining these sermons—and in particular, those that mattered for the escalation of the trials—we can trace resignification in relatively pure form, sidestepping debates about the modern mass media's increasing fragmentation, complicity with capitalism, etc. Finally, the trials are useful to examine because they combine elements of the three ideal types of moral panics, discussed with reference to the existing explanations of moral panics above. They occurred during a time of high anxiety and war on the front in Maine, combined with uncertainty about the colony's future (grassroots); The trials may have distracted the populace from several leaders' failures in the war (elite-engineered; Norton 2003); The trials may have become a vehicle for the ministers to reassert their power over the colony, which had been decline since 1660 (interest-group).

The Salem Witch Trials: an extremely brief narrative account[10]

In early 1692, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, both living in minister Samuel Parris's house in Salem Village, began behaving oddly—falling into fits and claiming to have visions. Dr. William Griggs diagnosed them as being "under an evil hand." Preliminary hearings began on March 1, 1692, with the questioning of Sarah Good, who ardently denied any wrongdoing; Sarah Osborne, who denied practicing witchcraft and claimed to be the victim of the Devil who took her likeness without her permission; and finally Tituba, who gave a long confession implicating Good and Osborne. On March 7, all three were sent to prison in Boston, where Osborne died on March 10. On March 11, Martha Corey, who had been open about her opposition to the accusations from the beginning, was accused, and on March 19 a warrant was issued for her arrest. On March 23, a complaint was filed against Rebecca Nurse.

From that weekend in March onward, the trials escalated to unheard of (for Massachusetts) proportions. Between the accusation of Nurse and the end of the trials, hundreds were accused and jailed. Colonial elites from Boston began discussing, and in some cases attending, the hearings and trials. On April 11, the Proctors' servant Mary Warren recanted her accusation of her employers, which quickly resulted in her being accused by the afflicted, a warrant being issued for her arrest on April 18, and her recanting her recantation on April 19. This was followed by the interrogation of Abigail Hobbs on April 19 and 20, in which Hobbs *openly and defiantly admitted to being a*

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[10] The chronologies of Salem abound, albeit not as much as the interpretations. Herein I rely upon dates from Le Beau (1998) and Norton (2003), as well as dates from primary accounts collected in Burr (2002 [1914]), Boyer and Nissenbaum (1993).

witch and effectively wrote her own guilty verdict, though interestingly not her death sentence.

Hobbs's confession, though bizarre in its forthrightness, reveals a central dynamic of the trials as they developed, whereby there were orders to keep alive those who confessed so that they could name their compatriots in witchcraft. This created a perverse incentive structure for the accused, and more pressure on the judges to condemn those who would not confess, so that the Colony could do *something* to fight the scourge that had taken ahold of Massachusetts. Part of this effort, emphasized and encouraged by Cotton Mather, was directed at finding the patriarchal head of this church of the Devil. This search was successful. George Burroughs, former minister at Salem Village, was arrested on April 30 and tried on August 5.

It is during the time of escalation that Increase Mather and William Phips returned to the Colony (they were in England, securing a new charter, when the trouble started in the spring). Confronted with the scourge of witches, Phips quickly appointed the court of Oyer and Terminer on May 16 to try them, and left for the front in Maine, leaving deputy governor William Stoughton in charge. The court proceeded with the trials, hearing supporters for the accused, but also hearing the repeated testimony of the afflicted. The court was of extremely elite composition, and it was these elites who informed the jury on June 29 that they were unsatisfied with the verdict of "not guilty" that the jury had reached with regard to Rebecca Nurse, causing the jury to reconvene and to return with the "revised" verdict that condemned Nurse to hang. Bridget Bishop was hanged on June 10. Five more women, including Good and Nurse, were hanged on July 19. On August 19 five men—including Burroughs–and one woman were hanged, and on September 22 two men and seven more women. To this add Martha Corey's husband Giles, who refused to enter a plea and was thus pressed to death by stones in an attempt to make him plead one way or another.

Phips suspended the Court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29; the new court convened on December 16. This new court had to follow the laws of the new Charter and thus could not restrict the jury to Congregationalists. Regardless, the tide of Puritan opinion had already turned. Acquittals followed quickly; though many remained in debt for years afterwards, unable to pay their jail fees. After 1692, virtually no witches were tried and executed in the North American colonies as a whole and in New England in particular.[11]

Quantitatively, the Essex County Witch crisis occurred in two waves—if one measures by accusations (see Table 2 and Fig. 2).[12] The first wave commenced in late March and carried through May; The second wave commenced in July, peaked in August and September, and dropped sharply in October in the lead up to the suspension of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. If one measures executions, it becomes clear that, with exception of the execution of Bridget Bishop on June 10, the executions follow more or less the pattern of the second wave of accusations—in other words, those found guilty and condemned to hang after being accused the first wave were hanged while the second wave of accusations was gaining steam and reaching its peak.

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[11] To be clear: *belief in witches* certainly did not disappear immediately, but the use of legitimate state violence to kill them did (Demos 2004, p. 387; Weisman 1984, p. 183).
[12] Data on accusations and executions is publically available at http://www.tulane.edu/~salem/.

Table 2 Accusations of witchcraft and executions for witchcraft by month, Massachusetts, 1692

Month	Accusations	Executions
January	0	0
February	3	0
March	4	0
April	22	0
May	39	0
June	3	1
July	12	5
August	23	5
September	33	9
October	1	0
November	3	0
December	0	0

Analyzing some well-timed sermons as instances of resignification

The causal conditions for the occurrence of the trials include the political uncertainties that attended a Colony without a Royal Charter, the social divisions in Salem Village, and the utility, for elites, of having an object of public attention that did not highlight the military failures in Maine (see Konig 1979; Boyer and Nissenbaum 1976; Norton 2003). The witch trials, moreover, reasserted the importance of the ministers' expertise at a time when that expertise had been in decline; for a short while, at least, it elevated the ministers as an interest group. But *how* did this happen? How were public fears "stoked," the flames of panic "fanned," and the "need to do something" articulated in a way that was convincing to many? Given the chronology set out above, the timing of
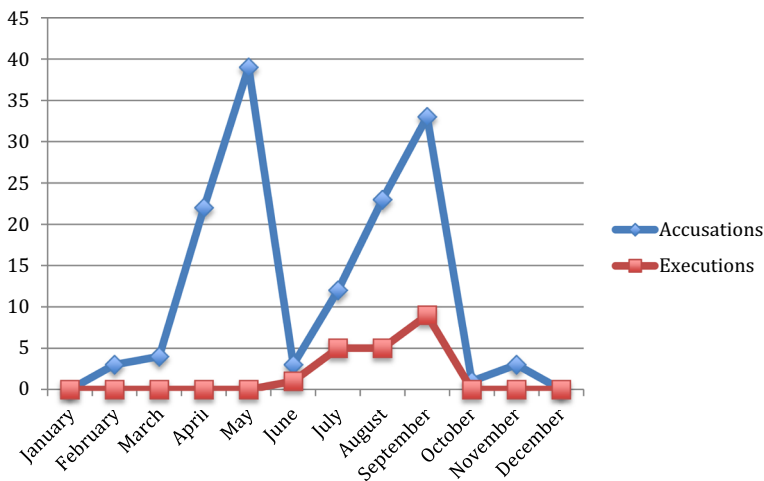
Fig. 2 Accusations of witchcraft and executions for the crime of witchcraft, Massachusetts, 1692
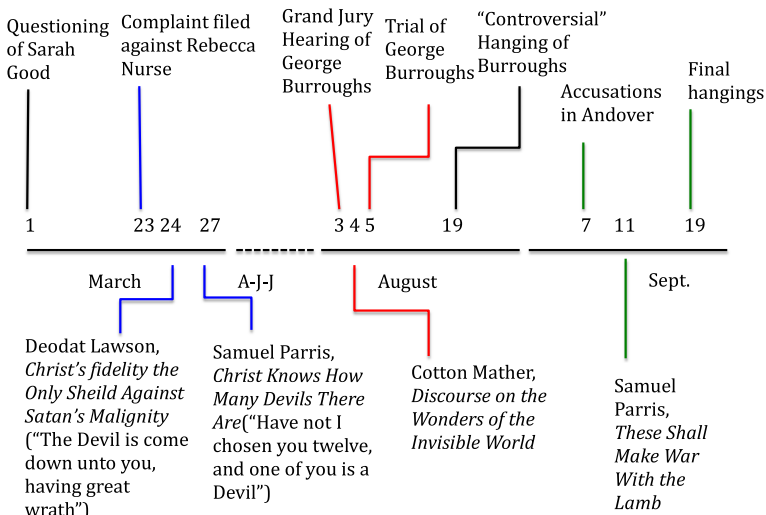
Fig. 3 Timely sermons during the Salem Witch Trials

several fiery sermons by prominent ministers, delivered on the occasion of, and about, witchcraft accusations, suggests that we should look quite closely at their content (Fig. 3).

The sermons I examine are as follows:

Deodat Lawson and Samuel Parris on the occasion of Rebecca Nurse's accusation

Deodat Lawson's sermon on March 24th ("Christ's Fidelity the Only Shield Against Satan's Malignity") and Samuel Paris's sermon on the 27th ("Christ Knows How Many Devils There Are") were given on the occasion of Rebecca Nurse's accusation (March 23) and examination (March 24). The accusation and examination of Nurse, a well-regarded and pious Puritan matriarch, longtime member of the church, and articulate denier of accusations against her, shocked the community. It is precisely an accusation of this sort—of a woman "in place," rather than "out of place"—which would normally would have been entirely unimpressive to the magistrates, leading them to dismiss any further accusations. And yet, as we see below, Parris and Lawson were able to transform the meaning of Nurse's accusation.

Cotton Mather's (in)famous sermon

The sermon by Cotton Mather on August 4th (reprinted and widely read as "Discourse on the Wonders of the Invisible World") occurred precisely between the grand jury hearing of (August 3) and trial of (August 5) George Burroughs—the alleged patriarchal leader of the witches. Burroughs had been dragged down from Maine to be tried, and, as a former minister in Salem Village, he was surely implicated in Salem politics, but, simultaneously, as an ordained

minister, above suspicion. The attack was also highly unusual vis-à-vis "normal" witch trials.

Samuel Parris's sermon in between rounds of executions

Samuel Parris's sermon of September 11th ("These Shall Make War With the Lamb") occurred in between the controversial executions of August 19, at which Burroughs was executed, and the final executions of September 22. According to Robert Calef's account of the August 19 executions, Burroughs recited the Lord's Prayer without error, which a true witch was, according to custom, unable to do, creating a stir of protest within the assembled crowd.[13]

What does it mean to say that the sermons "mattered"?

These sermons occurred at moments when a "normal" witch trial in Massachusetts Bay Colony would have run aground. The imputation of power to these sermons in this interpretation of the Trials, then, draws credibility, first, from the long history of witch trials as an institutionalized process in Massachusetts, which Salem departed from at key moments: The accusation and examination of Nurse, a well-regarded and pious Puritan matriarch; the accusation, examination, and eventual hanging of a former minister of Salem; and the actual carrying through of the murder of several well-regarded male members of Salem Village. All of these were unusual events by the standard of a "normal" witch trial. Thus it appears that at moments when it looked as though the trials might have lost credibility, the ministers were there to reenergize them and to make it clear that "something must be done."

Second, we know that the Puritans were deeply invested in oral authority, and in the sermon as its expression. The Massachusetts Congregationalists primarily thought of the printed word (outside of the Bible itself of course) as a way to communicate, albeit in less-than-perfect form, the oral presentations of ministers to those who could not be there to hear them. Michael Warner has contrasted this use of printing to that of Colonial Virginia and the Early American Republic, while Teresa Toulouse has examined the controversy and attention that surrounded the "Art of Prophesying" (Warner 1992; Toulouse 1987). In other words, the audiences for these sermons—which would have included the magistrates at the trials—took sermons seriously. However, this does not fully explain why *these sermons in particular* were important.

Thus, third and most important, we can also see that these sermons were *different in style, tone, and substance* from other sermons from the same time and place, some of them by the same ministers. In the analysis that follows, I present certain excerpts that

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[13] Robert Calef, in *More Wonders of the Invisible World,* printed in London in 1700, describes the scene this way: "Mr. Burroughs was carried in a Cart with the other, through the streets of Salem to Execution; when he was upon the Ladder, he made a Speech for the clearing of his Innocency, with such Solemn and Serious Expressions, as were to the Admiration of all present; his Prayer (which he concluded by repeated the Lord's Prayer,) was so well worded, and uttered with such composedness, and such (at least seeming) fervency of Spirit, as was very affecting, and drew Tears from many (so that it seemed to some, that the Spectators would hinder the Execution.)… Mr. Cotton Mather, being mounted upon a Horse, addressed himself to the People, partly to declare, that he was no ordained Minister, and partly to possess the people of his guilt; saying that the Devil has often been transformed into an Angel of Light; and this did somewhat appease the people" (Burr 2002 [1914], pp. 360–361).

exemplify the melodramatic, Satan-focused, cosmic-call-to-arms content of these sermons. This may echo stereotypes of the "fire and brimstone" style of early American Protestantism, the iconic example of which is Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But it essential to understand that not all Puritan sermons were like this. Indeed, these sermons departed from the form and content of sermons given in the same year by the same people. Cotton Mather preached two sermons to the deputy governor and the general court on June 9, 1692, "Good Men Described" and "Good things propounded," both of which are rather sunny in their disposition, full of advice for leaders to be generous of soul, and prophetic of good things coming to Massachusetts. The devil barely makes an appearance. The devil also plays almost no part in Lawson's Christmas sermon of 1692, which though dedicated to Samuel Sewall (a judge on the first court of Oyer and Terminer at Salem), makes little mention of the dramatic events of recent months, and instead sets out a series of recommendations for religious heads of household. Reaching further out into the historical record, William Corbin's sermon of June 7, 1693, in Kingstown Jamaica, given on the anniversary of the earthquake there, contains many scoldings to its hearers and indeed suggests a "cosmic" interpretation of the earthquake as a punishment by god for sinful behavior. But there are no open and direct calls to specific action or extensive discussions of the war between God and Devil. The sermon is melodramatic, but it lacks the tone of "something must be done." Interestingly, the sermons that share the most with the four analyzed here are Mathers's discourse to the forces sent out to fight the French-Indian war (September 1, 1689) and his discourse on the present state of New England upon news of the French-Indian invasion (January 20, 1690), both of which demand bloody self-sacrifice from good Christians.[14]

All of this suggests that these sermons, uttered at key points in the Trials, were designed for a specific purpose and that it is anachronistic to read them as just another expression of a Puritan worldview that turned every molehill of a sin into a mountain. Instead, these sermons should be viewed as *situated speech designed to call forth particular actions*—and as such it is not surprising that they sound a little bit like sermons uttered to soldiers on the brink of war. I now examine these four sermons together analytically to see what they *do* performatively.

Examining the four sermons together,[15] we can subject them to an analysis of what they accomplish. My reading of them reveals that: (1) the sermons resignified the concrete actions of the Salem Witch Trials, linking them with a massive crisis of the Colony that had many dimensions but was ultimately—on the second or "deeper" level of signification—metaphysical and connected to the ultimate fight between good and evil, God and the Devil; (2) this resignification was accomplished via synecdoche and

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[14] Cotton Mather, "Good Men Described and Good Things Propounded," Boston, 1692. Deodat Lawson, "The Duty& Property of a Religious Housbolder," Boston, 1693. William Corbin "A Sermon Preached at Kingstown in Jamaica," New York, 1703. Cotton Mather, "Souldiers Counselled," Boston, 1689. Cotton Mather, "The Present State of New England," Boston, 1690 (Evans 1968).

[15] For each sermon, the page numbers cited refer to the following sources: Deodat Lawson, "Christ's Fidelity the Only Shield Against Satan's Malignity," pp. 124–128 in Boyer and Nissenbaum (1993). Samuel Parris, "Christ Knows How Many Devils There Are," pp. 129–131 in Boyer and Nissenbaum (1993) and "These Shall Make War With the Lamb," pp. 132–136 in Boyer and Nissenbaum (1993). Cotton Mather, "Discourse on the Wonders of the Invisible World. Uttered (in part) on Aug. 4, 1692," Boston, 1693, in Evans (1968).

metanarrative; and (3) the resignification of the trials was combined with an overt "call to action" directed at the audience for the sermons, and in particular, certain powerful members of that audience, thus connecting the resignification to the building moral panic.

Synecdoche

Deodat Lawson chose Revelation XII:12 ("the Devil is come down unto you, having great wrath") as the starting point for his sermon, thus previewing his core synecdochal device: rooting out the witches of Salem is an essential battlefield in a larger, cosmic war between Christ and Satan; thus the part (the witch trials) stands for, is connected to, and is consequential for, the whole (the battle between Good and Evil, God and the Devil). "Awake, awake then, I beseech you," Lawson preached, "and remain no longer under the dominion of that prince of cruelty and malice, whose tyrannical fury we see thus exerted against the bodies and minds of these afflicted persons!" (p. 125). This was no average witchhunt, rather "this warning is directed to all manner of persons, according to their condition of life, both in civil and sacred order; both high and low, rich and poor, old and young, bond and free" (p. 125). Lest anyone be confused as to what he was referring to, Lawson then returns to the part—the concrete actions at hand—expressing "terror" at "such wretched souls … as having given up their names and souls to the Devil" (p. 126). He then makes clear his position on spectral evidence[16] by proclaiming that the tormenting of the afflicted by the specters of the accused is traceable to those "who by covenant, explicit or implicit, have bound themselves to be his slaves and drudges, consenting to be instruments in whose shapes he may torment and afflict their fellow-creatures" (126). Then, after insisting that those who go with God should "suppress that kindness and compassion" that is typical of them, he makes his case through a series of military metaphors that add up to the basic metonymical argument—that this particular violent episode is part of, and massively consequential for, the *ultimate* war:

> Satan is representing his infernal forces; and the devils seem to come armed, mustering amongst us. I am this day commanded to call and cry an alarm unto you: ARM, ARM, ARM! handle your arms, see that you are fixed and in a readiness, as faithful soldiers under the Captain of our salvation, that, by the shield of faith, ye and we all may resist the fiery darts of the wicked; and may be faithful unto death in our spiritual warfare; so shall we assuredly receive the crown of life (Rev. ii. 10). Let us admit no parley, give no quarter: let none of Satan's forces or furies be more vigilant to hurt us than we are to resist and repress them, in the name, and by the spirit, grace, and strength of our lord Jesus Christ. (p. 127)

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[16] The use of spectral evidence (testimony from afflicted persons about being visited by the specter of a specific accused person) was another way in which the Trials departed from precedent; the decision by the magistrates to allow this sort of evidence was encouraged in a letter from Cotton Mather, who went against clerical and legal precedent in advising it.

(second level of signification)

Synecdoche→		War of Christian Soldiers versus the Devil
Spectral evidence of witches	Real witches in Essex County	

(first level of signification)

Fig. 4 Deodat Lawson's synecdoche

This passage contains in focused form the interpretive device that defines Lawson's entire sermon and that *resignifies* the search for witches as a task of cosmic importance. Lawson's sermon, then, uses synecdoche to produce the resignification illustrated in Fig. 4.

Parris's starting point for his sermon was "John 6:70 'Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a Devil'" (p. 129). What followed an extended rhetorical figuration that cast the witches among the Congregationalist church as parallel to Judas among the Apostles. First, like Lawson, he makes the connection to the here and now: "What is meant here by *devils*?… Sometimes it is used for vile and wicked persons" (130). He thus denounces the "hypocrites" that pretend to be the most holy of congregation members but are in fact in league with Satan, as "sons and heirs of the devil, the free-holders of hell—whereas other sinners are but tenants" (p. 130). Insisting that the Lord *knows* who is who, he concludes that it is the fundamental duty of those who are not with Satan to root out the witches. In applying this melodrama, Parris cleverly obliterated the "normal" distinctions used to judge whether someone is likely to be a witch or not (e.g., not attending church, impiousness, etc.), leading to the resignification shown in Fig. 5.

Combined with Lawson's insistence that the present crisis applied to all, the possibility of a "normal" witch trial was suppressed, because *these witches came to stand for evil itself, and the most important battle of all.*

On August 4th, Cotton Mather extended the synecdoche and intensified the link to cosmic struggle. "'Tis to be supposed," he preached, "That there is a sort of Arbitrary, even Military *Government,* among the *Devils*" (p. 9). What Mather added to this was the sense of communal guilt, arguing that "When the Devil *does Hurt* unto us, he *Comes Down* unto us; for the Randezvouze of the *Infernal Troops,* is indeed in the *Supernal Parts* of our Air" (p. 12) Thus for Mather, the worst possible thing to do would be for an "ungodly people" to "give their *Consents* in *witchcrafts* diabolically performed, for the Divell to annoy their *Neighbours*" (p. 14).

(second level of signification)

Synecdoche →		Judas among the disciples
Fits of those afflicted by witches	Existence of witches among the Salem congregation (e.g., Rebecca Nurse)	

(first level of signification)

Fig. 5 Samuel Parris's synecdoche

Metanarrative

The Salem Witch Trials involved a lot of storytelling. At their core, accusations are narratives that recount what happened and offer interpretations as to why; then, in examining those accused of witchcraft, judges confront defendants with these stories and ask the accused to accept or deny guilt, explain, etc. (Brooks and Gewirtz 1998) In this regard, what happened at Salem in 1692 drew on a repertoire of stories, some of which could easily have been found at a "normal" witch trial. However, we can see in these same ministers' sermons a different level—a connection between the stories of specters and maleficium and the grand *metanarrative* of Puritan New England. The specific stories about what happened in Salem, in other words, were gathered together and connected with a cosmic story. This connection was made when the ministers interpreted the Trials as a key turning point in cosmic time.

Lawson's link between everyday and sacred time is implicit in his statement about war: "I am *this day* commanded to call and cry an alarm on to you" (p. 127) But it was more explicit in the way in which Lawson connected Christ's own triumph over the Devil and temptation to the struggle of 1692. The former is interpreted as *predicting* the outcome of the latter. Because "the Lord Jesus, the Captain of Our Salvation, hath already overcome the Devil," so, too, the righteous of Massachusetts would triumph. For, "if you are in covenant with the Devil, the intercession of the blessed Jesus is against you," and you could "be assured that although you should now evade the condemnation of man's judgment, and escape a violent death by the hand of justice; yet, unless God shall give you repentance (which we heartily pray for), there is a day coming when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed by Jesus Christ" (p. 126).

Lawson's references to time are thus primarily cosmic, and so in his sermon the metanarrative is a sort of addendum to synecdoche—time too has a part (the present in Salem) and a whole (the cosmic time of Judgment). Parris's sermon expressed a similar doubling of time—a connection of the diachronic with the apocalyptic (Hall 2009). It was Mather, however, who was the absolute master at connecting these two times explicitly and concretely, and who thus articulated the metanarrative with verve and clarity—perhaps not surprising given his prolific and extensive writings on the Puritan project and its universal importance. This penchant for metanarrative is revealed, first, in his choice of Revelations 12:12 as his starting point: "Wo to the Inhabitors of the Earth, and of the Sea; for the Devil is come down unto you, having great Wrath; because he knoweth, that he hath but a short time"(p. 2). Early in his sermon, then, he makes it clear that the diachronic "now" is also the foreordained battle for the forever:

> At the Resurrection of our Lord, there were seventeen or eighteen Hundred of those Years, yet upon the Line, to Run unto, *The Rest which Remains for the People of God;* and this Remnant in the *Line of Time,* is here in our *Apocalypse,* variously Embossed, Adorned, and Signalized with such Distinguished Events, if we mind them, will help us escape that Censure, *Can ye not Discern the Signs of the Times?* (pp. 2–3)

Later on, he makes it clear that because of the nearness of the "end times," the battle with the Devil is likely to be especially harsh and violent and to require special vigilance:

> Toward the *End* of his *Time* the *Descent* of the *Devil* in *Wrath* upon the World, will produce more *woful Effects,* than what have been in *Former Ages.* The *Dying* Dragon, will bite more Cruelly, and sting more bloodily than ever he did before: The *death-pangs* of the Devil will make him to be more of a *Devil* than ever he was; and the Furnace of this *Nebuchadnezaear* will be heated *seven times* hotter, just before its putting out. (pp. 21–22)

This theme is repeated often in his sermon; and it is, eventually connected to the ultimate victory of Christ:

> And I am suspicious, That there will again be an unusual Range of the Devil among us, a little before the *Second Coming* of our Lord, which will be, to give the last stroke in, *Destroying the Works of the Devil.* The *Evening Wolves* will be much abroad, when we are near the *Evening* of the World. (p. 28)

Thus the struggle against the witches in 1692 was located as a key turning point in the mythological narrative of Christianity. Mather is connecting what happens *now,* in these witch trials, to the overarching arc of Christian salvation of the world. This link to the metanarrative of apocalyptic Congregationalism produced the resignification seen in Fig 6.

Something must be done: calls to action

The rhetorical accomplishment of all of this synecdoche and metanarrative was to resignify the actions of the trials. The accused became *both* witches that could hurt their neighbors *and* the great cosmic threat of all times. The here-and-now became the cosmic-and-infinite, and decisions about who was and was not a witch became decisions to save, or to condemn, the Colony. But it is important to understand that this melodrama was connected to a demand for action. Analyses of moral panics often note that, at some point, moral entrepreneurs, agents of the state, or media figures argue publically that, in reaction to the folk devil, "something must be done"—whether the problem is Mods and Rockers at the beach, wilding in New York, or some other putative threat. How is this "argued"? Such calls became compelling because the deep, mythological resignifications that characterized these sermons render the calls to action weighty and urgent.

Samuel Parris begged his congregation to be vigilant in going after witches because "We are either saints or devils: the Scripture gives us no medium" (Parris, p. 131) And

<div align="center">(second level of signification)</div>

Metanarrative→		"the Evening of the world"—the final moment before the Second Coming
Witchcraft accusations in Salem and Andover	A scourge of witches in Essex County in 1692, a troubled time for the Colony	

(first level of signification)

Fig. 6 Cotton Mather's metanarrative

near the end of his sermon, Deodat Lawson implored the leaders of the Trial (the magistrates) to brook no obstacle:

> To our honored magistrates, here present this day, to inquire into these things, give me leave, much honored, to offer one word to your consideration. Do all that in you lies to check and rebuke Satan; endeavoring, by all ways and means that are according to the rule of God, to discover his instruments in these horrid operations… Being ordained of God to such a station (Rom. Xiii 1), we entreat you, bear not the sword in vain, as ver. 4; but approve yourselves a terror of and punishment to evil-doers, and a praise to them that do well (1 Peter ii. 14); ever remembering that ye judge not for men, but for the Lord (2 Chron. xix); and as his promise is, so our prayer shall be for you, without ceasing, that he would be with you in the judgment, as he that can and will direct, assist, and reward you. (Lawson, p. 128)

"Ye judge not for me but for the Lord": Lawson was clearly and directly connecting cosmic to worldly agency—in this case locating it with the judges. By August 4, the audience was much larger, setting the stage for Mather's histrionics, contained in a bizarrely compelling argument that much as the devil acts quickly and harshly when time is short, so should the defenders of Christ:

> What a Reasonable Thing then is it, that they whose *Time* is but *short,* should make as great *Use* of their *Time,* as ever they can! I pray, let us learn some *good,* even from the *Wicked One* himself. It has been advised, *Be Wise as Serpents:* why, there is a peece of *Wisdom,* whereto that *old Serpent,* the Divel himself, may be our Monitor. When the Divel perceives his *Time* is but *short,* it puts him upon *Great Wrath.* But how should it be with *us,* when we perceive that our *Time* is but *short?* why, it should put us upon *Great Work.* (p. 32)

Understanding the rhetorical effects of the ministers

Mather's claim, that the witch trials were "*Great work*" (echoed in one of his letters—Mather to John Richards May 31, 1692, in Silverman 1971, p. 37) is worth meditating on. From a sociological perspective, a "great work" did take place in Essex County in 1692, one that required tremendous symbolic and emotional labor, namely, the *resignification* of these witches as embodying every possible threat to the colony, and the greatest evil of all. This is, even on the terms of Puritan culture, a rather remarkable shift in understanding. How could it be that a few girls having fits could become, so quickly, a set of accusations that pointed at the witches of Essex as the walking embodiment of evil, whose threat was not just to their neighbors (as most witches were seen in Massachusetts) but to the cosmos as a whole and the Christian mission understood in the most universal of terms?

To understand this, we need to view their rhetoric as not just "heightened" but as very precisely situated and as deriving some of its effectiveness from its timeliness. As we have seen above, these ministers were capable of giving very different sorts of sermons when the circumstances were different. To understand the power of

resignification, in other words, we have to understand it as a specific kind of felicitous speech act, which responds to, transforms, and thus redirects the situation in which it takes place. Lawson and Parris's early sermons, I propose, transformed the shock and disbelief at Rebecca Nurse's accusation into fear concerning how deep Satan had reached into the congregation. Mather's sermon of August 4 doubled down on this sort of transformation. The people of Essex County were confronted with the scene of their former religious leader (Burroughs) being arrested and accused of violent and depraved complicity with the Devil. Mather was there to render this confusion into an emergency—this horrible, impossible thing was true because Massachusetts was in the middle of a *cosmic crisis.* And, if there were folks uncomfortable with the public hanging of their neighbors, Parris was there, in September, to remind everyone that *everything* must be done to keep Satan in check.

Theorizing the process of resignification in moral panics

Given this analysis, we can now attempt to articulate the process of "resignification" in moral panics at a greater level of abstraction. The core argument is that *resignification* is the process that creates disproportion, amplifies concern and hostility, and binds consensus by suppressing alternate interpretations of the course of events. It is, as a process, a combination of performative timing and mythological thinking, and because of its performative nature, it is also volatile (see the discussion of resignification vis-à-vis ideational embeddedness above). Via resignification, then,

(1)   a concrete, delimited set of action comes, via synecdoche, to stand in for a larger problem, crisis, or set of concerns;
(2)   these actions are placed in the temporal structure of a metanarrative;
(3)   a double symbolization of the "scapegoat" of the moral panic occurs, wherein the scapegoat comes to stand for more than itself—in addition, the scapegoat is interpreted as both revealing and embodying a society or social groups larger problems.

   The success of resignification is not guaranteed. It is, rather, a practical accomplishment. Thus we can also say about resignification that

(4)   it is accomplished by public communication, which, if successful, transforms the emotions and understandings of its audience;
(5)   this transformation often relies for its success on the rhetorical acuity and performative skill of certain key individuals;
(6)   because it is so public and so contextualized to the "sudden" problem presented by the folk devil, its rhetorical success is highly volatile and context-dependent.

   This leads to two further theoretical arguments that stand in significant tension with the overarching themes of the moral panics literature. The first is that disproportion, though it may rely upon certain human capacities for anxiety and exaggeration, is not really the product of a kind of mob-like "panic response." It is, rather, the result of the intensive labor of resignification. This labor, if executed successfully, provides the energy necessary for the cognitive and emotional transformations that turn a few witches into a cosmic crisis (or a small set of

robberies into a national problem with violent crime). From this point of view, then, the disproportionality of moral panics is created by the agents of resignification. Studying the witch hunt of 1692 is particularly useful for this issue. Rather than suggesting that disproportionality is about the relationship between the "real threat" and the "perceived threat," and thus engaging in a series of value-laden debates about how threatening the "social problem" *really is,* the Salem Witch Trials suggest that disproportionality should be defined counterfactually, rather than objectively. The issue is how the response that makes up the moral panic compares to the baseline social response to the threat at a given time and space, with the difference accounted for by the work of resignification.[17]

Second, moral panics are volatile *not* because the collectivity has a short attention span and *not* because the emotions associated with them are evanescent, but rather because maintaining them requires so much work and this work, when it succeeds, is tied to a very specific set of actions. Synecdoche, on other words, has a flip side: if one attaches a large moral project to a specific problem about which one creates a panic, then the resolution or reinterpretation of this problem can undermine the larger project.

Mods, rockers, and resignification

While I cannot, within the space of this article, extend the proposed theoretical schema of resignification/synecdoche/metanarrative across many cases, I can attempt to show how the theory applies to an exemplary case of a moral panic. Stanley Cohen's iconic study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* has gone through three editions and remains a reference point for the study of moral panics more generally. Much of Cohen's work on the media in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is devoted to documenting exaggeration empirically, thus setting up the longstanding debates in the sociology of moral panics around the issue of a "disproportionate" response to a threat that can be analyzed objectively. Furthermore, throughout the text, Cohen is concerned to analyze the central negative symbol of the panic—the "hooligan" or arrogant, immoral, and violent youth. This analysis would have as its parallel, in the analysis of Salem, a genealogy of the negative connotations of the figure of the "witch" in Puritan culture (see Karlsen 1998; Reed 2007).[18]

However, in one chapter in particular—chapter 3 ("Reaction: Opinion and Attitude Themes")—we can see resignification at work during a moral panic. In that chapter, Cohen addresses the "transition from initial reporting to the need for interpretation"

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[17] This view is a development of (and was inspired by) Goode and Ben-Yehuda's "contextual constructionism" vis-à-vis social problems, and in particular their note that, from a moral panic involves "huge *fluctuations* ... n the degree of concern over a given issue over time." Thus, separate from the objective impossibility of spellcasting, one could, from their "contextual constructionist" perspective, say that many in Massachusetts Bay Colony saw witchcraft as a *social problem* worthy of concern, and on occasion, action, over the course of the seventeenth century. But only in 1692 did the Colony go through a *moral panic* about witches. See Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, pp. 150–167, especially 165–166.

[18] So, for example, much of chapter 2 ("The Inventory," Cohen 2002, pp. 16–34) is dedicated to showing how perceptions of the affluence of the youth delinquents were false (p. 23); estimates of "loss of trade" and cost of damage by beach resort owners were wildly exaggerated (pp. 24–25); and the number of incidents of actual physical violence was remarkably small (p. 24). This analysis, while important to the case, is somewhat different in tone and purpose from the process of resignification I have identified here.

(p. 35), and a retrospective reading of his analysis reveals resignification at work, though not identified as such by Cohen.

Cohen explains that the beach disruptions were repeatedly analogized to natural and man-made disasters, including the argument that the "external enemies of 1940 had been replaced on our own shores in 1964 by internal enemies" (Cohen 2002, p. 38). Then, Cohen identifies the way "many observers likened the Mods and Rockers to a spreading social disease" (p. 46). This linked directly to the call for action, for as one MP put it, "if we want to stop it … we must immediately get rid of the bad children so that they cannot infect the good" (p. 47). Furthermore, Cohen identifies "It's not only this" as a central motor for opinion development during the panic. The Mods and Rockers *came to stand in for* a whole series of social problems including "pregnant schoolgirls, CND marches, beatniks, long hair, contraceptives in slot machines, purple hearts and smashing up telephone kiosks" (Cohen 2002, p. 39). Simultaneous to being labeled a "lunatic fringe," the Mods and Rockers were taken as *synechdochal for an entire generation.*[19]

As the notion of generational difference already suggests, the Mods and Rockers were also linked up to a grand metanarrative of triumph, decadence, and decline. Opinion pieces on the issue repeatedly gestured towards bored teenagers, and across the ideological spectrum, engaged with the idea that "teenagers today have no purpose" (Cohen 2002, p. 48). This evoked a grand story of the United Kingdom that organized many more specific ones: the discipline and triumph over evil of the World War II generation, followed by the decadence, thanklessness, and rootlessness of the Sixties generation. The Mods and Rockers were connected to a metanarrative of progress being overtaken by decline.

Implications for the sociological study of moral panics

Given the presence of resignification in the iconic case of a moral panic, as well as the way resignification helps explain the Salem Witch Trials, it seems reasonable to hypothesize, as a subject for future research, that this process may be a recurrent driver of moral panics generally. It may also be subject to certain sorts of (as of yet unobserved) variation. Lacking the results of this future research, a more figurative and speculative conclusion regarding how we think about moral panics can be suggested.

Despite great advancement—including the multidimensional understanding of actually existing moral panics as drawing from the ideal types of "elite engineered," "grassroots," and "interest groups"—many studies of moral panics nonetheless retain some of what David Garland identifies, somewhat pejoratively, as the "Durkheimian" aspects of the concept (Garland 2008), by which he means the assumption that the collectivity has ontological status and that it generates solidarity via the process of excluding (real or imagined) "deviants." To be clear, consensus is not assumed in extant

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[19] This is particularly the case with the "affluence myth" perpetrated by a report that a boy had told magistrates that he would write a check for 75 pounds to pay a fine imposed upon him. Despite the fact that this individual was quickly revealed to have neither 75 pounds nor a checking account, the synecdoche quickly took hold at the mythological, secondary level of signification: these teenagers stood in for a generation that had a cushy, affluent life (unlike their hardworking, disciplined parents), but nonetheless threw everything away via bad behavior, lack of respect for social order, and ultimately, crime and violence.

sociological theories of the moral panic. However, although there may not be consensus within the society about how, precisely, to view the "scapegoats" in a moral panic (e.g., Cohen 2002, pp. 49–56), the *overall* phenomenon of the moral panic is understood at the societal level to be one wherein "society" draws boundaries around itself. But this sort of analysis subtly betrays a problematic assumption in our understanding of moral panics, namely, how they relate to time.

Undoubtedly, sociologists see moral panics as concrete processes that happen in time, and that "build up steam," etc. However, they tend to see the panic as a process that, once started, is extremely difficult to stop. To speak metaphorically, in the sociological understanding of moral panics, the process works somewhat like a runaway train, with more and more passengers hopping on board to speed it down the mountain. The sensationalist media fans the flames, politicians and moralists emerge out of the woodwork to condemn and prophesize, the populace sees its fears confirmed and thus engages even more in the illusion, and so on. But in the view I have presented here, a moral panic is more like a boulder that has to be pushed up a hill to higher and higher levels of panic and concern. It requires the input of a great deal of energy and thus requires a great deal of *work*. This is the work of resignification. And it is by developing a theory of resignification that we can advance our understanding of moral panics. This understanding, in turn, connects to broader questions about the theorization of culture in sociology.

Episodically deep culture

Contemporary cultural sociology in the American academy has, since its origins in the 1980s, developed a series of arguments against the unreconstructed structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss. The byword of these arguments has been practice (Bourdieu 1990; Schatzki et al. 2005); the core of their insight has been the contingency and creativity of human action (Joas 1996); the central theoretical question that has emerged has been that of dialectically linking action and structure, with particular attention to the symbolic systems, linguistic and otherwise, upon which actors depend (Sewell 1992). How does this dependence work (Schudson 1989)? How is reproduction instantiated in events (Moore 2011)? How can disruption be understood (Ermakoff 2010)?

We usually begin attempts to answer these questions with a core theoretical opposition, sometimes embodied in different "schools" of cultural sociology: emphasis on discourses, collective representations, and mythological structures is contrasted to an emphasis on culture in interaction, the pragmatics of localized usage, and the toolkit metaphor. Theoretical and empirical research is then conducted to span this divide. Thus it has been proposed that the divide might be conquered by using an intermediary term like "group style" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), or by examining the degree to which contingent performances manage to become like rituals (Alexander and Mast 2006). These efforts are salutory attempts to save the basic insight of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995)—that action is deeply immersed in symbolic patterns that exceed the individual—from all of the theoretical baggage that notoriously comes with Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian sociology. In particular, the goal has been to avoid an *ontological structuralism of culture,* wherein the big myths are

secretly "out there" pulling the strings of social life, a kind of symbolic version of the solidaristic society behaving functionally.[20] In an attempt to avoid this implication, a great deal of research energy has been directed at the *mediators* between so-called collective representations and concrete action.

The downside of this spanning-the-divide intellectual strategy is, however, that our basic imagery of "deep culture" remains intact—though we attribute less and less causal power to it the more we become pragmatists. Perhaps this works well enough for a while, but in the long run, it is a bad sign if a research program implies an ontology it does not itself accept (Abbott 2001, p. 97). Rather than constantly disavowing the Durkheimian ontology that some of our own analyses imply, can we, instead, rethink in a more radical way what it would mean to talk about deep cultural structures?

In this regard, theories of rhetoric can be particularly useful. For rhetoric is, classically, a location of passion and "depth" of emotion and an eminently practical accomplishment. In this spirit, a rapprochement between the structuralist analysis favored by Barthes and the pragmatism of Burke is both possible and desirable. It is possible because both Barthes and Burke looked *hors texte* to understand literature itself, while maintaining that a great deal of the inner workings of social life itself contained "literary" elements—figures, tropes, and intertwined layers of signification that had to be carefully parsed by the analyst.[21] It is desirable because it provides a new way to think about deep culture at the level of myth.

The ground for myth is surely prepared in thousands of everyday actions such as bedtime stories, mundane sermons, television programs, etc. The ideational embeddedness of policy-making is an example of this—who could deny the habitual use of moral individualism and anti-state suspicion in American politics, and its parallel expression in Hollywood action movies and country music songs? For the Puritans, religious reading, the repetitive uttering of prayers, and elaborated religious storytelling within and without the congregation were all everyday practices (Hall 1990). Thus the story of Jesus and the beginning of the completion of his mission via a city on a hill in North America was embedded in everyday life, as were the horrid tales of devils and sinful women (Karlsen 1998). But this did not, as everyday practice, amount to or draw upon myth as an "ontological" structure. Instead, via practice, habit, and everyday

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[20] Omar Lizardo (2010) has argued that Levi-Strauss's structuralism can only be rescued as methodological approach—in other words, that a "non-denotational model" of structure must replace any ontological claims made by a theory of structure. William Sewell, Jr. (2005, pp. 328–346) has *also* argued that a culturalist or interpretivist sociology must avoid a strict textualism or "linguistic reductionism," and engage the making of meaning as a practical accomplishment.

[21] In "Towards a New Contextualism: The Complementary Theories of Kenneth Burke and Roland Barthes," Elizabeth Neild affirms the importance of connotation and myth for Barthes's overall oeuvre, while admitting that his basic view of the object of literary analysis is "entirely static" (1978, p. 101). While developing the potential contained in Barthes's structuralism, she corrects for this via Burke's emphasis on the *act* as essential, developed via his analysis of the US Constitution: "as the constitution itself was an enactment by particular agents in a particular scene, so subsequent interpretations of the constitution and its amendments will themselves be enactments by particular agents in particular scenes" (p. 72). Ultimately, Neild suggests in her conclusion a complementarity that I try to actualize for sociological analysis in this article: "Burke's method focuses primarily on the work in relation to writer and reader; thus in the pragmatic dimension. Barthes method focuses internally, on the relationships of the signs to one another; thus in the syntactic dimension. The three dimensions described by Morris—the pragmatic, the semantic, and the syntactic—are interdependent and complementary" (p. 214).

meaning, the groundwork was laid for the *building up* of myth as a temporally specific accomplishment. Myth came onto the scene, then, as a fragile assemblage performed for a specific purpose.

Thus myth is not, in the view presented here, an ontological structure conditioned by the mind's preference for binary reasoning, nor even "an abstract structure through which the human mind imposes a necessary order and a symbolic content through which the formal structure is applied to contingent, socially defined experience" (Wright 1977, p. 11). Rather, in this article, I have attempted to show how the ministers' sermons, *understood as speech acts in social context,* were acts of power precisely insofar as they adeptly used synecdoche and metanarrative to create a "mythological episode." Thus "deep culture" is not a reservoir to be drawn on now and then. It is, instead, an episodic product of immense hard work—the work of resignification.

This way of thinking about deep culture has two implications for the questions we ask moving forward. First, it returns us to the core problematic with which cultural sociology began: how is the construction of the meaningful social world like, and unlike, the labor that goes into the creation of art? Both a rhetorically effective myth and a highly successful opera now appear to be the result of the labor of signification. This reconnection to the sociology of art and literature, under the guise of Burke and Barthes, is, I propose, a useful revisit for cultural sociology (e.g., see Zolberg 1990). For, when we stop thinking of myth in a Durkheimian way, we are forced to recognize just how much work it is to stage a witch trial.

Second, to understand myth as an accomplished act of power is to depart from the Durkheimian language of ritual and return to the question of what enables domination and legitimates the use of violence. It is possible that the Salem Witch Trials had some "ritual-like" qualities. But ultimately they should be understood as *departing* from the standard script for a witch trial. Thus it is important to view the Trials as a volatile and even fragile accomplishment, rather than a pre-ordained or entirely scripted ritual. Furthermore, the volatility of this mythological episode did not disable its violence— rather, it enabled it, as the sense of *emergency* helped legitimate the hanging of neighbors. In other words, melodrama is not only the purview of Hollywood, it is part of the assemblage of social crisis. This is the sociological lesson to take from the moral panic that was the Salem Witch Trials.

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